

House Human Services Committee

House Bill 1488

Andrew Alexis Varvel

February 8, 2021

[Bilingual testimony in Lakota and English begins]

Itǎ́hǎ́nčhaŋ Weisz na Kǎ́hamíte Óyapǎ́hapi:
Andrew Alexis Varvel emá́čiyapelo. Tǎ́spáŋ Ožú-yata waúŋ.

Chairman Weisz and Members of the Committee:
My name is Andrew Alexis Varvel. I live in Bismarck.

Šakówiŋkiya ilúthapo. Wáŋčala luksápo.

Measure seven times. Cut once.

Toháŋ waníyetu mašákpe, iná opǎ́hétǎ́hŋ ognáke. “Aǎ́ÚYAPI ĞÍĜÍLA Tǎ́ÓGNAKE” tǎ́chǎ́že. Iná kuŋkúnja gnáke. “Aǎ́ÚYAPI ĞÍĜÍLA Tǎ́ÓGNAKE” tǎ́chǎ́že čhaŋkhé hepǎ́hé “lé aǎ́yapi ğíĝíla tǎ́ógnake” epǎ́hé ló. Iná kuŋkúnja gnáke čhaŋkhé heyé “lé kuŋkúnja tǎ́ógnake” eyé ló.

When I was six years old, my mother bought a jar. It was labeled “COOKIE JAR”. My mother stored pickles in it. I said, “This is a cookie jar,” because it was labeled “COOKIE JAR”. My mother said, “This is a pickle jar,” because she stored pickles in it.

Wóawačhiŋ tǎ́khǎ́mite lé ognáke hé sékse. Uŋnáš ognáke aǎ́yapi ğíĝíla úŋ kte. Uŋnáš ognáke kuŋkúnja úŋ kte.

This proposed commission is like that jar. Maybe it will hold cookies. Maybe it will hold pickles.

Wówičakǎ́he tǎ́khǎ́mite owé tǎ́oktǎ́ókeča mánipi. Eyá owóthǎ́ŋja. Eyá owóthǎ́ŋja šni. Eyá očík'ayela waŋyáŋkapi. Eyá othǎ́ŋkaya waŋyáŋkapi. Takúku inyáŋkapi éslol'unyapi kta héčha.

Truth commissions come in many varieties. Some are straight. Some are crooked. Some have a narrow scope. Some have a broad scope. We should learn what works.

**This jar is a pickle jar
when it holds pickles.**



Wóawačhiŋ lé uŋkáyutapi tkéya. Uŋhíyaglepi kiŋháŋ, káǵapi kta iyéčheča. Táku uŋ glušnášniyaŋ kǵamíte niťháwa wóopǵhela káǵapi kiŋ lé wayáwapi ťhawóštaŋpi waŋ luťhókečapi kta héčha.

This proposal should be taken seriously. If it comes to pass, it must be done right. This is precisely why your committee should turn this legislation into a study resolution.

[Monolingual testimony in English begins]

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Maine and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada had a narrow focus. They were limited to conditions in Indian boarding schools.

Indian boarding schools in the United States were a road paved with good intentions.

Vice President Charles Curtis was the first – and so far the only – Indian vice president. His mother was Kanza. His father was Euro-American. Charles Curtis initially lived among the Kanza people under the guidance of his maternal grandfather, his itcígo, and maternal grandmother, his ikón. He spoke French. He spoke Kanza. He rode a horse. And yet, to save his life during a mass deportation, his ikon commanded him to live with his paternal grandmother in Topeka, Kansas.

Charles Curtis learned the ways of what some people would eventually call “white privilege”. He flourished. He prospered. He became an attorney. He became a Congressman. He became a United States Senator. He became the Majority Whip. He became the Majority Leader of the United States Senate. He eventually became the Vice President of the United States.

Vice President Curtis favored assimilation so other Indians could share his privilege. This was a tragedy. He was not the only person to imagine that other people wanted the privileges he had enjoyed. Not everybody – of any racial background – necessarily wants his privilege. Liberty means the freedom to choose traditional ways. Liberty means the freedom to chart one's own course. Liberty means not being required to live within the dream of someone else.

In [A Brief History of North Dakota](#) (1925), Herbert Clay Fish and R. M. Black wrote the following about the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara:

“They are jealous of their old mother tongues and are slow to give them up for the white man's language. Nearly all of the young men speak English, but the middle aged and the old men and women cling tenaciously to the original languages.”

Please think carefully about the word “cling”. Think about what it means, then and now. It stings. It stings to anybody who feels even the slightest amount of conservatism. It stings from an arrogance which presumes superiority over other cultures they arbitrarily deem to be “savage”.

Were Indian boarding schools significantly different from other contemporary orphanages and boarding schools from the era? Far from being peculiar, the brutality of these schools may have been comparable to analogous institutions. Answering this would require longitudinal study.

The New York Military Academy, where President Donald Trump lived as an adolescent, was particularly notorious for its brutality and its hazing. This is why, far from demonizing our ex-president like so many other people have done, I pity him. I feel sorry for what he went through.

If this commission is controlled by Indian tribes with a focus on Indian trauma and only on Indian trauma, this could easily become a grievance commission that does not live up to its stated mission. Do you want other people to listen or do you want to vent to yet another brick wall? It is not a conversation when only certain people feel that they can speak about their trauma.

Even if one were to stipulate that Indians win the Oppression Olympiad of North Dakota (the term "Oppression Olympics" was coined in 1993 by Elizabeth Martinez in a conversation with Angela Davis, both of them Marxist professors), no group has a monopoly over intergenerational trauma. We should not forget that the State of North Dakota had a policy of forced sterilization from 1913 to 1965 in the name of Eugenics. Even if the number of Indians may have been disproportionate, they were not alone. Once our society argues over whose lives matter more, we all lose.

Sioux County remembers three men lynched in Emmons County in 1897. It got nationwide coverage, including the front page of a black newspaper called "The World", printed in the Twin Cities. "The World" said their names. "The World" printed their faces. The culture of Emmons County got imprinted by the murder of the Spicer family earlier that year. It also got nationwide coverage. Each event was an atrocity. Beware of double moral bookkeeping. People tend to remember what was done to them. People don't necessarily remember what was done to others.

Measure seven times. Cut once.

Please turn House Bill 1488 into a study resolution. Failing that, please recommend *DO NOT PASS*.

[Bilingual testimony in Lakota and English begins]

Philámayayapi.

Thank you.

Andrew Alexis Varvel
2630 Commons Avenue
Bismarck, ND 58503
701-255-6639
mr.a.alexis.varvel@gmail.com